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## Women and Dress

Sometimes things fall in place and eventually make sense in a way that is surprising and satisfying. This is what happened to me as this edition of *Report* took shape. It is almost two years since I volunteered to compile an issue of *Report* and of the available choices decided to compile an issue on "Women and Dress." When the time came to decide how to address this topic, I chose to take an eclectic approach as opposed to a more thematic one.

I found enthusiastic women willing to share their experiences and beliefs. As the articles began to come in, I slowly realized that unconsciously in my eclectic approach I was telling the story of my own struggles with women and dress.

I grew up in a conservative Mennonite community where the cape dress, the head covering and the plain coat were important and I somehow came to believe that it was the "world" who had drifted away from the true teachings. I can still remember my sense of betrayal when I learned differently. Marlene's article reminded me of that confusing time.

I was 30 years old when I no longer could live with the confusion and decided to find out who I was as a Mennonite woman. My children witnessed my changing process and as I read Deborah's article I wondered what my daughters thoughts might be when they look at photographs of their grandmother, of me and themselves.

I could write in great length how each article touched the wounded part of me that had been influenced by others in my past. For me, the earlier teachings and how I interpreted them affected how I felt about myself as a woman and as a sexual woman. The part of me that loved color and creativity was stifled for a long time. And yet, there are parts of my Mennonite tradition I value and respect. I am grateful that I have learned that I can, as Deborah suggests, avoid what is life-denying by choosing what is life-giving for me.

—Mary Martin

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by Julie Landis Musselman

## A Woman of the Cloth: On Being a Mennonite Fashion Designer

Two years ago I was visiting Hong Kong on business. Standing in the lobby of a luxury hotel, I spotted an Old Order Mennonite woman about my age. Instinctively I wanted to rush over and investigate. Our respective clothing put us in two different worlds. Fearing I would overwhelm or intimidate by my appearance and approach, I backed off. I walked on, thinking about how crazy it was for me to have run into another Mennonite woman in Hong Kong. How ironic! Here I was in this hifalutin job, dressed to the nines, and this quaint memento of my first life passed before my

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eyes! While it was a bit unnerving, it reminded me of what my dad used to say: "Remember who you are!"

Site: 150-year-old, three-family-unit farm house, ninth-generation Mennonite, circa 1940. I arrived a female, born into a typical family lifestyle. At that time the role extended to women seemed inherited. It depicted silent participants in a routine of marriage, childbearing and unending chores. All of life was inextricably enmeshed with the church. The women in my adolescent years were strong and sturdy and modeled the incredible non-stop work ethic; they submitted to church rules with an obedient religiosity. There were unspoken bonds among the women in this sheltered community. They were unified and empowered by the commonality of their lives. This mentality was perpetuated by stern (but whispered) disapproval of any woman who deviated from this pattern. At this time in my life there was no call for discussion about a daughter's future, her career or talents. It was simply a non-issue. We were all too busy. (No mentor here no how—none even on the horizon.)

Jumping now to the present—designing apparel is both a demanding and rewarding job, as laid out in the next paragraph. Being who I am, a female who was raised in a Mennonite sub-culture in the 1950s, has made it even more so. In the remainder of the article, I will present several ideas on how these past influences have affected the living out of my career choice.

In most apparel businesses, the designer is the key player. Designers set the tone and pace of the work flow of a season by coming up with the creative direction for each clothing collection. That's the fun part! One works under the gun of a calendar and the clock—never enough hours in the day and the workload is oppressive. There are constant risks—predictions as to what new color, new fabric or new style will sell a year from now. The product is up against fierce competition in the marketplace. One is paid to shop and traveling to Hong Kong and Europe several times a year is exciting. Persuasive communication skills are essential to defend ideas when critiqued and necessary to convince skeptical backers and sales representatives that indeed, your creations are "right on" and will sell! It's a plus if you are single, tall, slim and blonde, ageless and independently wealthy.

And then there is the company you work for! In my experience, management invariably falls short in the area of business acumen for various reasons. Daily decisions reek with unconscionable power plays and ego trips. If sales

slump, for any reason, the designer is always the first to be blamed. All this puts the designer high on the casualty list, often results in rapid personnel turnover and stress-related ailments, and casts a demoralizing effect on an apparel team.

The biggest and toughest issue for me as a prospective apparel designer was dealing with the initial lack of permission, support and encouragement to explore this career. Instead of feeling blessed and good about these strong pulls and constant delights evoked by working with fabric, I felt cursed. Sewing quilts just didn't cut it for me—my personal statement took shape in the form of clothing. Eventually I realized that I had to explore these interests and I decided to complete my college education in design.

Twenty-five years had stacked up since my freshman year at Goshen College. I took the plunge and enrolled at Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia. These years were layered with searching for the answers to this contradictory state in which I found myself. Why was I given this gift if forbidden to use it—if it was all wrong? I felt I was being drawn in a direction diametrically opposed to the position that had evolved in my church on dress and this direction had become, in my opinion, a benchmark of our sect. I honestly felt my choosing this profession would be seen as rejecting my beliefs and stooping to something akin to a life of crime! My community counsel was all about the frivolity of fashion as a career and how it held no credibility as "real work." It certainly wasn't among the helping professions! I was at a loss to counter these charges and was stalled for several years, searching for alternatives. I tried to convince myself to consider the field of child development or at least home economics.

It was support from women friends outside the church that gave me courage to listen to myself and trust that designing apparel was not, in itself, self-centered or evil, and that God did not work only through nurses, teachers and people in church-related professions. Eventually I began to believe that the church and I were struggling with similar problems. We both had complicated and exaggerated the issues surrounding dress and the value of an individual's appearance had taken on god-like proportions.

As an adolescent in the Mennonite church in the '50s, the influence of strict, authoritarian rule that governed in the church also permeated family life and community. Testing the waters with personal ideas and challenging the status quo were neither encouraged nor permitted. Healthy give and take was non-existent. Assertive behavior modeled by a woman in

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this arena was rare. As a result, beginning my work as a designer was almost like taking a leap into another world. Often during my career there were times in which I fell short while "on the stand." If, within the safe environs of my home and church community, I had experienced my thoughts on issues being heard and considered valid, my entrance into the business world could have been less traumatic. My self-esteem would have run deeper, verbal attacks and criticism would have been less personalized, and anger could have been handled more appropriately.

"Warning: Low-Level Values in Place Here!" Maybe it would have been helpful for me had there been signs such as that posted in the workplace! After one year on the job I began to feel negative vibes from my boss and feared my job was at stake. This had nothing to do with the quality of my work. I was told in a performance review, simply, that I "didn't fit in." I soon realized that my boss was reacting negatively to personal qualities attributed to my being Mennonite. The word had circulated that I couldn't possibly be a good designer—how could a Mennonite design? As often happened, I was being stereotyped as Amish. I simply did not know what to do and started looking for another job. Several weeks later I heard via the grapevine that the decision was made to keep me on because I was 44 years old and, if

fired, might possibly sue for age discrimination. This confirmed how much they knew about Mennonites!

Although not necessarily specific to this career field, the values that I observed played out by individuals and organizations were often contradictory to my Mennonite beliefs. For this reason, I felt people perceived me as naive and not really capable or effective in some situations. Because of these differences I often felt at a disadvantage and did not best know how to defend myself with people who did not share these values.

My career has had its ups and downs. Once I actually got rolling, my community provided incredible support and I could not have done all I did without them. Coming home from my job at night became a refuge and relief. Currently my job permits me to stay in my community and work out of my house via fax. I am in the process of reconciling the two worlds of fashion and the Mennonite church. I see myself fashioning an Anabaptist way of dress. I am working to create a look that both the church and I can embrace—a look that communicates all that we actually stand for and not one based on the fashions of the 1800s.

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**"Women have shouldered most of the 'burden of nonconformity' when it comes to dress—their bodies have been most clearly marked and regulated as Mennonite."**

by Pamela Klassen

## Women's Sexuality and the Messages of Dress

The clothes we wear do more than clothe us. Despite repeated admonitions from Mennonite clergy over the years reminding laypeople that clothing has strictly practical purposes, dress has always been a way of communicating for Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike. Devotional head coverings have shown women's submission to male headship, white wedding dresses may connote virginity and wedding rings can signal commitment and "unavailability." One of the most profound messages dress conveys is a culture's attitude to sexuality.

Women's dress has a particularly intimate relationship with sexuality. In the early part of this century, discussions about dress within Mennonite communities often began with reference to "the Fall." In a 1921 treatise on dress, signed mostly by American Mennonites, the Mennonite Church tried to set the "perverted use" of dress in biblical context by stating that clothing "is the first thing mentioned after the fall of man" (Gen. 3:7,21). The treatise goes on to declare that fashions "are of the world, and are therefore of Satanic origin, as 'the whole world lieth in the wicked one,'" and that fashions "excite lust." In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of the transgression of Eve and Adam and the clothing that subsequently covered their nakedness, has ever since linked women's bodies and clothing with shame and sexual temptation.

Eve-blaming is still with us, as this letter published in a 1992 Mennonite periodical shows: "Eve began it all. She manipulated and maneuvered just like many women today who will do anything to get what they want. Eve caused Adam to sin." This writer, a woman, makes such claims after wondering if sexual harassment and abuse of women come from "...short skirts? Too low necklines? Captivating glances of women?" Similarly, a male letter-writer to another Mennonite periodical in 1992 asks, "Could it be that women suffer sexual assaults because they exhibit too much flesh?"

While perspectives blaming women for provoking sexual violence through dress are certainly only one part of the diversity of Mennonite opinion, these views have their counterparts in wider society. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, details numerous court cases where women's charges of harassment against employers were dismissed because the

women were "provocatively" dressed. In a no-win twist she goes on to list cases in which women lost their jobs for not dressing in a sufficiently "feminine" manner. The view that women are "asking for it" ("it" being rape, harassment, etc.) through the clothes they wear shows the devastating power that patriarchal norms for women's bodies and dress can hold in society.

Mennonite women of Russian and Swiss descent have had a somewhat different experience of dress than have most other North American women. Though the General Conference Church did not go as far as the Mennonite Church did in declaring the devotional covering a church ordinance, GCs also tacitly regulated women's dress. The stories by my Manitoba Russian Mennonite family include an aunt who bought her first pair of high heel shoes only to have them thrown in a tree by her father upon their discovery. My mother speaks of gazing longingly at the ever-present picture of the "wide and narrow way" as a girl, wishing she could walk with the women on the wide way (not the way to heaven), joining them in sporting beautiful dresses. She stubbornly hoped that in heaven there would be beautiful dresses.

In making tacit and overt statements about dress, GC and MC clergymen took a "Satanic worldly tool," and used it to convey their own symbolic messages about women's and men's roles in the social order. Women must practice modesty and men must not be tempted. Sexuality must be kept within its proper domain, which is not out in the street or in the church. Modest dress keeps the tempting body out of public sight. Women participated in maintaining such roles, but also pushed the boundaries with such sartorial challenges as rosettes on a bonnet or wearing a full-length wedding gown.

Women, as Marlene Epp so carefully argues, have shouldered most of the "burden of nonconformity" when it comes to dress—their bodies have been most clearly marked and regulated as Mennonite. Whether cape dresses, coverings or



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flat-heeled shoes are the preferred mode, women's non-conformity in dress separates them from the eyes of the world not primarily through their convictions or actions, but through their bodies.

Dress codes in Mennonite and wider society have traditionally ensured a duality of genders. The expectation that women dress one way and men another symbolically separates communities into two genders, supporting heterosexuality. The blurring of dress codes (in North American culture the move of women to wearing pants) constitutes a profound symbolic threat to conventional divisions of sexuality and power. Women "wearing the pants" not only threaten realms of power within families and communities, but they may also challenge norms of female and male sexuality.

Dress does not always carry such contested meanings, however. Dressing in a favorite color or a supple fabric can express one's pleasure and joy over being a body. Wearing a sweater hand-knit by a mother or a friend can connect someone within important relationships. Accepting our bodies and living within them allows us to enjoy the textures and warmth of clothing and to value and honor the diversity of our sexuality.

The ministers making the rules in 1921 did have one thing right though. Their treatise also notes that fashions "cost the world billions of dollars annually—entirely too expensive." My thoughts here deal mostly with middle-class examples of ethnic Mennonite women who presently have more money than most to spend on clothing. Taking pleasure in clothing and being innovative with fashion does not necessarily entail spending large sums of money or even following the norm of what is in vogue. In choosing our own clothing without being dominated by either clergy or fashion moguls, we can exercise aesthetic and practical judgement.

By making decisions about our own self-representation through dress we can express our sensual and even our spiritual selves. While dress is a powerful tool of communication, however, it does not have the final word. Whether a woman wears a short skirt and a low neckline, or a cape dress and a head covering, the message of her dress should not be interpreted apart from the message of her own actions and words.

**Pamela Klassen is a Canadian from Ontario presently living in New Jersey. She is working on her Ph.D. in Religion and Society at Drew University in Madison, N.J. Her particular interest is ritual in the lives of Mennonite women, especially rituals of birth and healing.**

  
by Janet Martin

## **Distinctive Dress and the Newcomer**

In 1952 when I first came into the Mennonite Church, all the women had long hair, arranged in a number of different styles, and wore white prayer veilings, also of varying shapes and sizes. A good number still wore the cape dress although, again, there was a great variety of necklines, collars, sleeves and skirts! It seemed to be the older men or those in leadership positions who wore the plain coat. Apparel was often mentioned in sermons but the emphasis was on simplicity and modesty more than on a prescribed pattern.

Simplicity and modesty had not figured prominently in the sermons delivered in my little Gospel church, although I remember having been admonished once by an older member after she had seen me wearing shorts in public. Our separation from the world was expressed mainly in our activities—we didn't smoke, swear, go to movies, play pool or date anyone who wasn't a born-again Christian.

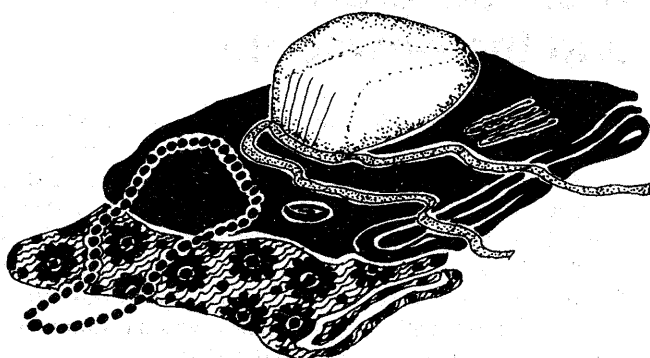
At that time I was a relatively new Christian and a first-year student at Toronto Bible College. I had responded to God's call to full-time service and was open and eager to learn all that He had to teach me. No doubt my interest in the relationship between appearance and testimony was precipitated by my growing friendship with one of the Mennonite men students.

Our attraction to each other had surprised our friends. He was quiet and reserved; I was lively and spontaneous. He was a conservative dresser; I, being a professional dressmaker's daughter, wore the latest college fashions.

Our relationship developed but was not without pressures from well-meaning friends. "What," his friends wondered, "would his congregation think of her?" "Would you really want to become a Mennonite?" asked mine. This led to some searching questions: Why did Mennonites put such an emphasis on conservative dress? What was the biblical basis? I was surprised and intrigued by what I read and began to do some self-evaluation regarding my own appearance and what that said to the world I hoped to win for my Lord. I started to let my hair grow longer and stopped wearing jewelry; when summer came I avoided shorts and sleeveless dresses.

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That summer I spent quite a lot of time in the Kitchener area, attending the Brunk tent meetings, getting to know the Martin family who were still in the Old Order Church, and generally making myself familiar with Mennonites. Everywhere I went I was welcomed and felt a real kinship with these so-called "peculiar people." Gradually I was developing my own convictions about dress and so did not feel that I was being pressured into any regulated way of dressing. I took it for granted that each one was free and desired, as I did, to reflect their faith and commitment to God by their dress and comportment. Perhaps I was a little naive? My efforts to dress more simply did not go unnoticed by my friends at home who wondered "why he wants to change you." Perhaps their greatest bewilderment came at our wedding. I was determined that it should be a reflection of our commitment to each other and to the Lord, and not the fashion parade that my mother had produced (so lovingly, it must be said) for the brides in our little church. Looking back, I can admit that I was a little over-zealous in refusing to have a short, simple

bridal veil that would have meant so much to Mom. My dear Old Order mother-in-law surprised us all by wearing a pale mauve flowered dress because she "figured everyone else would be in light colors" (thus proving that a generous spirit can rise above regulations!). She later dyed it royal blue in order to feel more at home among the gros-mommies at church.

By the time we left for mission work in Quebec in 1956, I was thoroughly integrated, but then came the adjustment to yet another culture, one where the distinction between the church (black-robed nuns, priests and monks) and the laity (exhibiting the flair for which their race is renowned) was most pronounced.

We missionaries wanted to identify with the people and give yet another expression to the word "religious." After a number of years, we took another look at what we had thought were firm convictions and made some changes: 1) We decided that the women should wear wedding rings (so as not to pass, in this 1960's Catholic culture, for loose women); 2) We gave up the prayer veiling because it seemed to create barriers between us and seekers, as well as separate us from other evangelical Christians with whom we worked closely; 3) We felt free to wear slacks in Quebec's cold winters and during camping trips, etc.; 4) I, because of certain health-related problems, decided to cut my hair.

Today you could say that I have come almost full circle. Rather than trying to be distinctive in dress, I strive to fit into my surroundings—to be neither too avant-garde nor too out-of-style, neither too flashy nor too dowdy, and especially not to create envy in other less-affluent church members. Actually, my standards of dress have changed little over the years. Comfort, good grooming and coordinated colors are my rule-of-thumb. Modesty, simplicity and thrift are my mottoes.

Janet Martin was born in London, England, and immigrated with her family at age 14 to Ontario, Canada. She and her husband Tilman were one of the first two Mennonite missionary couples to be sent to Quebec in 1956. The Martins have four children and seven grandchildren. Over the years Janet has served on various committees, including one which organized rallies and retreats for French-speaking Christian women. She also wrote a column in a French Christian magazine for 10 years. More recently she has served as Quebec correspondent for the Mennonite Reporter and as Quebec Liaison-Person for the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada. For the past two years she and her husband have been "more or less" retired.

**"Particularly with respect to headgear, dress regulations also defined woman's role as subordinate in the creation order and within the human order."**

by Marlene Epp

## **The Double Standard of Nonconformity: An Historical Perspective**

In the majority of Mennonite churches today, dress does not seem to be much of an issue. Peculiar dress seems to be a characteristic of only those groups that have chosen to visibly define their separation from the world. This was not always the case. A look into history reveals that dress was one of the most contentious issues for many years in at least one branch of Mennonitism.

During the late 19th century, the head covering—also called prayer veiling or cap or devotional covering—became an official church ordinance and henceforth the primary symbol of a woman's membership in the Mennonite Church. ["Mennonite Church" here refers to the Mennonites of Swiss origin formally organized as the Mennonite General Conference of North America. In Ontario, which was the focus of my research, the relevant body was called the Mennonite Conference of Ontario.]

The covering was accompanied by several other distinct dress forms—the bonnet and cape dress for women and the plain coat for men. These together comprised a uniform of "plain dress," which more than anything else set the Mennonites apart from the surrounding society. During the first decades of the 20th century, these dress forms were encoded in church statutes and constitutions and to a widely varying degree were made a test of membership. These regulations caused considerable conflict in some congregations when local ministers or groups of individuals, seeing no justifiable grounds for such rigidity, chose to defy them. Resistance to plain dress was particularly acute when it was apparent that standards were applied more rigorously to women than to men.

The dress issue arose in the context of liberalizing fashion styles at the turn of the century but also as a response by conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists to the so-called "new woman" making her appearance in public life. The entry of women into higher education and the professions, the struggle for the vote by early feminists, and the declining birth rate were all cause for concern among those

who decried women's departure from traditional roles. The growing range of activities in which women were involved was accompanied by a more natural dress style, replacing the heavily-corsetted, bustled and restrictive forms of dress dominant for much of the 19th century. Distinct dress as a reaction to these trends served not only to emphasize Mennonite nonconformity to the world. Particularly with respect to headgear, dress regulations also defined woman's role as subordinate in the creation order and within the human order.

While women had historically covered their heads as a matter of custom, by the late 19th century Mennonite church leaders began to define the head covering in theological terms, using I Corinthians 11 as their primary defense. American leader Daniel Kauffman, whose 1898 *Manual of Bible Doctrines* placed the head covering on a list of seven Christian ordinances, argued that a covering was necessary to visibly define the relation between man and woman. As the doctrinal significance of the covering was developed and strengthened, the frequency of wearing increased. Women were expected to cover their heads not just during church services, but throughout their daily activities. They were to "pray without ceasing." This trend also suggests that the question of women's submission was as much a social one as a religious issue. American church leader Harold S. Bender, generally considered a moderate among "Old" Mennonites, offered one of the most orthodox justifications for the practice: "The entire question is not one of moral or religious nature, but social. The covering of the head is not a necessity to make God hear the woman's prayers, or to recognize as valid her contribution to the religious life of the community—it is a necessity to preserve the divinely ordained social order from disruption and to enforce the lesson of woman's submission to man."

One Canadian minister argued that the covering provided women with extra spiritual power since Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden demonstrated that women were more easily led astray. An Ontario bishop argued that women who refused to wear the head covering were "usurping man's position and power" and "scorning her God-given position of motherhood." This same minister decried the "physical freedom" offered by the fashions of the 1920's which was contrary to woman's recognition, through the clothing that she wore, of her subordinate relationship to man.

Closely related to the head covering was the bonnet which, because it did not carry the same doctrinal significance, became the focus of much of the friction surrounding the dress issue. The rationale which was most often put forward for the wearing of the plain bonnet—which sat on the back of



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the head, had a brim and tied under the chin—rested on the belief that it was the most appropriate headgear to wear with a covering. If the bonnet was discarded in favor of the modern hat—which sat on top of the head and was normally not tied—then the covering was sure to go next. Like the head covering, the outmoded plain bonnet identified the Mennonite woman as different and was thus a testimonial to her religious beliefs. The cape dress for women and plain coat for men were also part of the Mennonite "uniform" but, in the absence of scriptural foundations, received less attention than women's headgear.

After 1900 the problem of dress, particularly the covering and bonnet, appeared regularly on the agenda of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario, even though the Canadians were somewhat more tentative than their American cousins about taking a strict stand. Conflicts over dress occurred in numerous congregations and especially at mission stations, where new converts were eager to embrace Christianity but more hesitant to adopt the peculiar garb of the Mennonites. This was a problem at the Toronto mission since its inception in 1907 and culminated in the resignation of superintendent Nelson Martin in 1923. Martin felt that the efforts of the mission were doomed to fail because members were constantly subject to harassment when wearing bonnets.

One of the most outstanding and bitter struggles was at First Mennonite Church in Kitchener. Reacting to the fact that a large number of young women at First had ceased wearing bonnets (and possibly also coverings) in favor of hats to their factory jobs in town, the Waterloo County ministers' meeting passed a resolution in 1921 which made the wearing of the bonnet a test of membership for women. When a district bishop refused to serve communion to women wearing hats, over 100 members of First, including minister U.K. Weber, protested the conference bonnet regulation. In the investigation which followed, it became apparent that some members, both men and women, were disturbed by the double standard whereby women's headgear was enforced more strictly than the plain coat for men. The conference did not respond to these allegations, but instead reinforced its position on the bonnet accompanied by a stiff warning against noncompliance. The end result was that Weber, along with over 100 dissenters, seceded from First to form an independent congregation called Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church, located only a block away.

While the wearing of the bonnet and the cape dress began to decline in the 1940s, the head covering seemed to receive renewed attention. In 1942 the Ontario Amish Mennonite

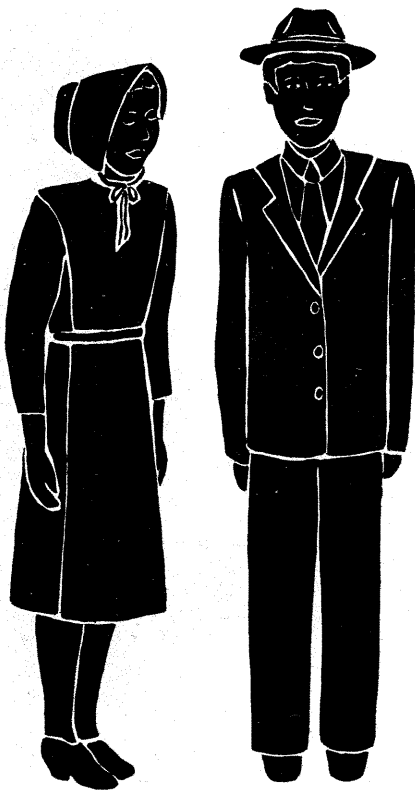
Conference passed concurrent resolutions on apparel and women's sphere. Because of Eve's "outstanding part" in the transgression in the Garden of Eden, the resolution said, women had to remain "in a position of subjection to man," of which the head covering was a symbol. An Ontario bishop cautioned that the "modern" woman needed the head covering more than ever in order to refrain from the temptations of fashion, to remind her of her place beneath man in the affairs of the church, and to encourage her not to evade her responsibility in child-bearing. It would seem, however, that modern trends and/or the resistance of women to dress regulations were stronger than the voices of conservatism in the church.

By the mid to late-1960s even the head covering had become more or less a matter of individual conscience or at least an issue to be worked out at the congregational level. Yet as late as 1960 a division occurred within the Ontario conference which gave rise to a new conservative body which emphasized the traditional forms of dress for both women and men. Throughout the years of dress regulation, women did not simply acquiesce to official dictates, as the events at First Mennonite demonstrate. While some women were vehement in defense of their special garb—one woman likening her head covering to the crown of thorns worn by Christ—others openly defied the dress code or found ways of undermining the prescribed uniform. Among many women there was substantial resentment over the double standard. One woman stated succinctly: "They [the men] could wear the ordinary things and we had to wear the plain things." That Mennonite women were thus identified more visibly than men was quite evident. This caused no small amount of bitterness. One woman wrote: "I always thought there was a differentiation that wasn't quite fair. The men...could have the best kind of cloth in their suits and be very well-dressed. But the women were supposed to abide by a pattern, a very plain pattern of dress—and of course a headdress that matched. A Mennonite woman was very easily recognized as a Mennonite."

Men were able to interact more inconspicuously with non-Mennonites as a result. The most extreme consequence of this was that, according to some recollections, men began dating non-Mennonite women and marrying out of the church, leaving behind the "plain" Mennonite females. It seemed that women were expected to carry the nonconformity banner for the entire church.

This caused no small amount of discomfort for some women. One woman recalled embarrassment about her bonnet and even feelings of persecution when girls at her high school would try on her bonnet in fun. A minister's wife from





Waterloo, Ont., said she “just hated that old bonnet” and when she went to high school chose to wear a hat instead, even if it meant being put out of the church. One woman of Amish background recalled of her teenage years: “I had one made pretty much against my will. We just went to the bonnetmaker’s and she measured me. I wasn’t asked whether I wanted one or not. I didn’t care to wear anything on my head.” This same woman was “shocked and surprised” when she finally discovered that this particular form of plain dress had not always been part of Mennonite teaching. Her reaction points to the difficulty of enforcing the dress code when women could easily refute arguments about custom and tradition by pointing to the attire of their 19th-century mothers and grandmothers, which did not differ to any great extent from the rest of society.

Some women found amusing ways of expressing their resistance to prescribed dress. These small acts of rebellion included the minister’s wife who, when her husband suggested that their 11-year-old daughter should wear a bonnet even though she was not yet a church member, had a bonnet custom-made of pink straw for the girl. Well known is the story of two American Mennonite women who, enroute by ship to mission work in Turkey, reportedly tossed their regulation bonnets overboard. One of these women, in observing the resistance of Turkish women to regulations regarding veiling of the face, wrote: “The Turkish women must be going through a process of liberation much as our Mennonite women have.” Other women found ways of modifying their bonnets so as to render them less unfashionable. At the turn of the century, Ontario Mennonite women were known for their “hat-bonnets”—a type of headgear which tied under the chin like a bonnet but was covered in ribbons and had the shape of a hat. The gradual removal of the ties and brim from the plain bonnet so that it resembled a “turban” was another step toward adapting an outmoded style. Resistance toward the head covering took the form of leaving the strings dangling free or gradually removing them altogether and reducing the size of the cap itself.

Women objected to the church’s double standard which made Mennonite women more “plain” than men. The fact that the regulation on plain dress was directed almost exclusively toward women reflected an underlying view of women. That women were to be humble, submissive and demonstrate those qualities most fitting a wife and mother was a perspective held by fundamentalists to be sure, but was also reinforced by a more general societal reaction to the limited emancipation which women had experienced at the turn of the century and during the two world wars. A more extreme belief was also present—that women were easily led astray morally and if allowed to follow the trends of modern fashion would bring a corrupting influence to the church. To the extent that coverings and bonnets were to be accepted as symbols of women’s subordination, resistance to them reveals defiance of the subordinate roles implicit in the regulation attire.

**Marlene Epp is a doctoral candidate in Canadian history at University of Toronto, focusing on Mennonite women immigrants. Her master’s thesis was entitled “The ‘Dress Question’ among Ontario Mennonites, 1898-1960.”**

**"While I recognize that something is lost with increased interaction and integration with the world around us, I am not ready to forego what is gained."**

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by Deborah R. Weaver

## No Longer Separate

Looking at a photograph of my grandmothers, my mother and myself, one might think that we span more than three generations. My grandmothers have both worn the traditional cape dress and head covering all of their lives, with their uncut hair tucked underneath their coverings. My mother wore conservative dress growing up, including a covering. Only after marrying and leaving her home area did she begin wearing dresses without capes, cutting her hair, wearing a covering only to church and eventually stop wearing a covering. I have never worn clothing that is distinct in any way from that of mainstream society. I grew up wearing pants and wearing my hair cut short, and the only time I have worn a covering was during my baptism ceremony. While I have often felt separate from mainstream society, it has not been in terms of dress.

With the changes in dress, changes in lifestyle, world perspectives, goals and commitments have followed. Dressing like "everybody else" allows us to mingle with them and, perhaps more significantly, doesn't prevent them from mingling with us. We are no longer identifiable by the clothing we wear, either by other Mennonites or by non-Mennonites.

I am reminded of the story my parents told me about their honeymoon, which was spent traveling throughout the southern and midwestern states. One afternoon they saw a couple who, from their dress, they recognized as Mennonites. My parents, also wearing distinctively Mennonite clothing, introduced themselves and were promptly invited to have dinner in the other couple's home. During dinner my parents were invited to spend the night, which they did, and were told that although the host couple would be leaving early the next morning, they could stay as long as they wanted and should simply lock the front door when they left.

Many Mennonites from my generation will never experience something like this, because we would not recognize each other. Even if we were to start talking and discover our common Mennonite tradition, the sense of connectedness, the sense of belonging to a separate, "not-of-this-world" subculture, is simply not as strong as it was for my parents or is for my grandparents. Certainly young Mennonites find their



tradition to be a common denominator that provides them with a common language, but it is only one denominator among many. My generation interacts to a greater degree in non-Mennonite and even secular circles and our "normal" dress has had a lot to do with it.

While I recognize that something is lost with increased interaction and integration with the world around us, I am not ready to forego what is gained. There is much to be learned from our non-Mennonite neighbors, whether they be Christian or non-Christian. My generation has been influenced and challenged by both non-Mennonite religious communities and secular communities, and this exposure forces us to reevaluate what we have been taught. This has led many of us to challenge the Mennonite Church on issues such as the exclusive maleness of God, the universal claims of Christianity, patriarchy and how it has oppressed women both outside

**"I do not, however, view my freedom as an opportunity to escape the Mennonite tradition, but rather to decide which practices and values I find life-giving and which I find life-denying."**

and within the church, and the rejection of those with different lifestyles and orientations, particularly those in the gay community.

Certainly this complicates our world view and our personal belief systems and sometimes I wish I could find clarity by simply pinning on a head covering and wearing a cape dress. For me, however, there is no returning to such a life. Even if I could, I don't pretend to think that simpler always means easier.

I respect the tradition of men and women who choose to wear the traditional Mennonite garb, and as I mentioned before, I sometimes envy a life which appears to be filled with fewer ambiguities and complicated decisions. But I am glad my mother made the choices she did, because my non-distinct dress has opened up many more options for me. The absence of the physical restrictions, let alone the theological implications, of the cape dress and covering is freeing in itself. I do not, however, view my freedom as an opportunity to escape the Mennonite tradition, but rather to decide which practices and values I find life-giving and which I find life-denying.

As I return to the photograph of my grandmothers, my mother and myself, I wonder what my granddaughter will have to say about herself, her mother and me. It is impossible for me to know how differently she will dress, and what her style of dress will mean about her life choices and priorities. What I hope is that even though in appearance she may not resemble me in any way, she will recognize our common commitment to the life-giving values we have learned from the Mennonite way of life.

**Deborah R. Weaver is originally from Lancaster, Pa., and recently moved to Denver, Col., with plans to begin a Masters of Divinity program at Iliff School of Theology. She is interested in theology and peace and justice issues, especially as they relate to and affect women. She enjoys reading, photography, music and keeping a personal journal.**

**"I wasn't sure if my attitude about myself affected the clothes I chose, or if the clothes I chose affected my attitude about myself."**

by Miriam Frey

## Dress for The Working Professional Woman

To be taken seriously, professional women have to pay attention to the business dress code. The way a woman chooses to dress makes a statement about who she is (the secretary or manager), the status she holds and the authority she carries. Also, the way a woman chooses to dress influences how she feels about herself. Over the past 20 years I have changed my wardrobe many times and have learned much about the powerful influence of dress.

When I began my working career as a secretary and bank teller, it was appropriate to dress as the fashion world dictated. It was fun to dress in frilly blouses and short or long skirts, whichever was in style. But after several years I began to read books like *Color Me Beautiful* by Carole Jackson (Ballantine, N.Y., 1981), which suggested that persons could influence their image by the colors and styles they wore.

In the early 1980s, when it became popular to analyze one's colors and styles, I received professional advice about the appropriate styles for me. I began to pay attention to how I felt in certain colors and styles. This awareness was particularly new to me since I grew up in a conservative Mennonite church which taught me to dress modestly and to ignore fashion. I began to learn that how I dressed made a difference in how I felt about myself and how I related to others.

After reading popular books on "dressing for success," I began to experiment at the office. If I wanted to be taken seriously during a meeting I learned that if I wore a black or navy suit (my colors) it was easier to convince others that my ideas were valid. My wardrobe soon began to change as I reduced the frilly and stylish outfits and added suits and blazers. My appearance was more professional and I felt good about how I looked at work. I wasn't sure if my attitude about myself affected the clothes I chose, or if the clothes I chose affected my attitude about myself. But it didn't matter much after I decided to accept a voluntary service assignment with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), because then I purchased very few clothes for several years.

I arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, eager to learn. One of the fastest lessons I learned was that what was professional in Canada

**"I became painfully aware that I exemplified wealth and superiority as I walked among beggars and street vendors. They were dressed in rags and sandals made of rubber tires while I marched through their midst dressed like a millionaire."**

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was not appropriate in Africa. One morning just after I arrived, I remember I wore a black suit with a white blouse. There were two blocks between my car and the office and those were the two most uncomfortable blocks I have ever walked. I became painfully aware that I exemplified wealth and superiority as I walked among beggars and street vendors. They were dressed in rags and sandals made of rubber tires while I marched through their midst dressed like a millionaire. Every outfit in my closet revealed my status as

a foreigner and with it an assumed authority. I was not comfortable with my position. I sometimes think it was a blessing when my clothes were all stolen about three months before I returned to Canada.

I returned home with a cultural experience but no clothing, and an opportunity to start over with my wardrobe. I had to make some choices about the statement I wanted to make. After my experience in Africa it was hard to think of wearing a two-piece black suit again. However, it was not long until I entered the North American business world where professionalism had become a key factor in how I was expected to dress.

After living outside Canada for three years, I became aware of a shift in how professional women were expected to dress. No longer did they have to imitate the men in three-piece business suits, but they were expected to dress conservatively and with style. To become credible in the business world, I felt I had to wear suits and dresses which indicated my status. I do not always feel good about giving in to the expectations of the business world and yet I want to function effectively within the system. I know several men who refuse to dress up for the office, but they are considered eccentric. The standards within the business world do not allow women to deviate as far from the norm if they want to be taken seriously.

My experience has been that women's clothes influence how they view themselves and how they are treated by others. At the office we dress to ensure our own success within the system and to gain others' respect. But we also dress to let others know how we feel about ourselves (confident or victimized) and to fit the social setting, whether that is a business meeting or an office party. I believe our clothes communicate a lot about our personality as well as our priorities, economic and professional status, and personal ambitions.

**Miriam Frey is from St. Jacobs, Ont. At age 39 she has just completed her B.A. in psychology and has ambitions now to continue with a Master's program. Miriam served four years with MCC, in Washington D.C. in 1973 and in Kenya 1984 through 1987. She is now the Member Relations Manager at Mennonite Savings and Credit Union, a financial co-operative with headquarters in Waterloo, Ont.**

**"I can think of only a few ways that I am creative with color, texture, unusual combination, or flamboyance. I can practice these skills in cooking, home decorating, and adornment of the person."**

**"There is no denying the joy of adornment. Rather than see it as an artificial or unnatural imposition, is it not possible to see adornment as a basic human need?"**

by Raylene Hinz-Penner

## A Case for Adornment

Some date the second wave of the women's movement from 1968 when the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City was protested by angry women. Indeed, ever since the 1970's when bra-burning became a public symbol and women disposed of their bras as symbolic of the stiff, exterior control of male preference over their natural female selves, wearing the loose breast like a badge of freedom, I have watched the accompanying unfolding of a tension among feminists. Women are torn between their own preferences, styles and tastes and the need to refuse the impositions of commercial or male tastes. I never quit wearing a bra, even when everyone else did. I could never see the wearing of a bra as related to men or as symbolic homage when it seemed to have so much more to do with me, the way I felt, the way I looked to myself.

It is not about the wearing of undergarments that I am sometimes questioned, however, and even accused of treachery to my gender. It is about adornment—clothing that could be broadly classified as stylish, including makeup, earrings, nail polish or contemporary haircuts—that I sense the disapproval of my sisters, Gloria Steinem's model notwithstanding. This is complicated by the fact that I am a Mennonite and part of a culture which prides itself (perhaps mostly falsely!) on its simplicity. Thus, when many of the women at the college where I teach bring together their understanding of feminist ideals and Mennonite historical lifestyle that argues for being in the world but not of it, they find it necessary to disdain makeup and other adornment. I am supportive of them in their need to simplify their lives and appreciate themselves for who they are in their natural state. I should say from the start that when adornment becomes obsession, takes a disproportionate amount of one's time, or becomes more important than work or people or self-improvement or spirituality, then I also am critical of adornment as I would be of any other all-consuming habit. But I feel that I can make a case for my own interest in adornment. Here follows my defense; I hope it is not defensive.

I enjoy dressing, with accessories. I can think of only a few ways that I am creative with color, texture, unusual combination, or flamboyance. I can practice these skills in cooking,

home decorating, and adornment of the person. I don't paint or draw or sew. I find that when I am called upon to fill out those "Are You Creative?" questionnaires, I always think of my earring collection first, not necessarily my poetry writing.

It is a psychological boost to prepare oneself for the day with the use of makeup and clothing. For me, it literally revitalizes some inner spirit that turns on my energy. One can, with adornment, present oneself to the world. In fact, one cannot not make a statement with clothing! Since we must dress, our dress speaks for who we think ourselves to be. I am convinced, moreover, that I meet people better, feel more poised, friendly, and ready to take on the world because I have prepared (adorned?) myself. I think it is the practice of an art form to buy thriftily and combine artistically for an interesting style. Why can I not argue that I like myself, so I adorn myself, the contrary of that suggestion that if one really liked herself she would have no need to adorn?

There is no denying the joy of adornment. Rather than see it as an artificial or unnatural imposition, is it not possible to see adornment as a basic human need? The earliest humans, it has been suggested, donned the figleaf not to cover themselves in shame, the Garden of Eden story notwithstanding, but to enhance; for example, because the female reproductive organs were highly valued, they were covered with the magic of seashells or a grass girdle. Seashells, thought to have life-giving magic, became necklaces or girdles (Harris and Johnston 14). The earliest adornment for the male may have been the confidence boost necessary to take on the primitive world: "His adornment was as much an extension of his self as his club was an extension of his arm" (14). One theory suggests that clothing began with the attraction to adornment: a primitive human picks up a beautiful rock or flower, then needing the hands to do something else, ties the flower or stone to a vine and hangs it around the neck or waist. This decorative instinct is one we share with the primates either in captivity or in the wild (Gurel and Beeson 5). Typically, we would see clothing today then, as necessary, first of all, for comfort or warmth (and even so, the Eskimos' dress is of great interest to anthropologists), but beyond that basic consideration, suggesting something about group identification, social status, individuality, or the need for creative self-expression. It is apparent to me that the latter two exist in me as the strongest motivators.

The adornment of the body is, of course, a political act. The change in dress of proclaimed feminists since the 1970s is instructive. Heeding Nancy Williamson's influential 1971 article, "Case for Studied Ugliness," in which she said, "[W]e

## Women in Ministry

**"The way I dress today is related to the work I do, to the energy I wish to summon, to the students, colleagues, and public with whom I interact, even a demonstration of my zeal for what I am doing!"**

- **Renee Sauder** of Newton, Kan., will begin July 1993 as pastor at Erb Street Mennonite Church in Waterloo, Ont.
- **Mary Jane Davis** was ordained October 11 at Grantham (Pa.) Brethren in Christ Church.
- **Joyce and Don Wyse** were ordained September 13 at First Mennonite Church in San Francisco.
- **Ruth Boehm** was ordained at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Man., on November 1.

are rejecting the image of the bejeweled, bedecked woman; we are not only refusing to fritter away our time, energy and money noncreatively supporting a coterie of male fashion pimps who created a false and humiliating image of femaleness, we are actively discrediting that image" (Levine 38), women dressed in revolt, reaction, rebellion, and to identify themselves with a cause and a statement. However, in the past two decades feminists have recognized more and more the needs of the individual female. Says Judith Levine in a more recent feminist manifesto on sartorial expectations: "Because clothing is a universal language—you cannot not speak it—feminism must be concerned with allowing a woman to enjoy clothes, which involves nothing less than loving herself. Clothing can speak pride, a sense of humor, and a joy in making a splash without competitively putting down friends and sisters. We can dress in ways that look toward a future of sexual liberation, economic equality and freedom of expression" (Levine 46).

I clearly have more interest in my own need for self-expression and a creative outlet than I do in identifying myself as a "simple person" by the garb I don. It would feel like a lie for me to do otherwise. Some would say that my attitude is indicative of the Mennonite loss of community. The truth is that the simple dress of Mennonite ancestors was functional, related to the work that they did, to the fact that they kept to themselves in their communities, to the social interactions which did not occur. The way I dress today is related to the work I do, to the energy I wish to summon, to the students, colleagues, and public with whom I interact, even a demonstration of my zeal for what I am doing!

I have chosen to live in the world. It is a false pretense to suggest by my simple appearance that I am part of a disciplined community. Disciplines for us, now, are self-imposed. Clearly, Mennonites have "bought in" to the success principle in academics, in lifestyle, even in their church life. It is a lie to try to look as if I haven't. Adornment suggests that I embrace life in this world.

Oscar Wilde was supposed to have defined fashion: "The unthinkable worn by the unspeakable." I do not deny that I am at least marginally motivated by rebellion in my joy of adornment. It was not lost on me that my mother's membership in her more conservative branch of Mennonites was retracted when she married my father, who was part of a more liberal branch. I am further keenly aware that one of the major issues in my mother's home church was a woman's wearing of earrings. I hope that my "rebellion" is a statement that who I am in my faith is above those kinds of petty issues.



It is a joy in the liberation of the simple people to focus on issues that matter more in the total scheme of things.

Adornment for me connotes a joie de vivre that both feminist and Mennonite lifestyles are too often lacking. To give up the language of clothing is to make my life smaller and meaner.

**Raylene Hinz-Penner** is a professor of English at Bethel College in North Newton, Kan. She enjoys the challenge of helping students confront issues women and men face in their roles today. On campus Raylene is known not only as a professor but also as a published poet. This article reprinted by permission from *A Drink from the Stream: Essays by Bethel College Faculty and Staff*, edited by John K. Sheriff and Alain Epp Weaver, and published by Bethel College, 1991.

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• **Diane Zaerr** was ordained at First Mennonite Church of Iowa City on January 10.

• **Marlene Kropf** was ordained for churchwide ministry on November 22 at Belmont Mennonite Church in

Elkhart, Ind. She serves as minister of worship and spirituality at the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries and teaches part time at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries.

## Suggested Resources

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## Letters

I have tried time and time again to lay aside the March-April, 1992, issue of *Women's Concerns* without writing a response to Willard Krabill's article "Needed: A Sexual Counter Culture." I haven't been able to do so.

I agree with the main assertion of the article, that we need as a community to affirm that sexual is who we are and that it is a wonderful gift from God, and thus build a counter culture based on respect, concern for others, celebration, peace and justice. Yet I stumbled over this sentence: "Genital activity is but a part of sexuality and one can be a whole, healthy, fulfilled, vibrantly sexual being without ever experiencing genital intercourse." Coming from someone who has been long-married and presumably with guilt-free opportunities to experience genital intercourse by choice, such a statement is hardly fair, I feel. It is akin to the rich Westerner promising the starving African that she would some day be satisfied, calling to mind James 2:15-16.

My question for the past five years since my divorce—when after 25 years the fulfillment of my sexual desire was wrested from me by my husband's decision—has been how to deal

with the hunger for sexual celebration that cannot be satisfied. Both those of us who have known the sacramental joy of sexual intercourse and those of us who have only heard/read of others' experiences of it know that we are missing a deep spiritual experience of oneness with another human being. We also know that those satisfied and monogamous among us don't know the pain they inflict when they tell us to live without that fulfillment.

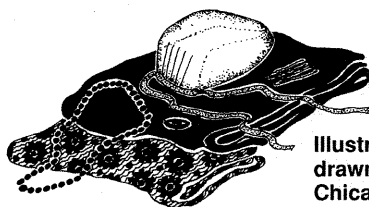
My constant companion in these lonely years has been struggle. How do I put to rest this deep body-and-soul hunger without the repression and denial that stifles my spirit? What do I do late at night when my body yearns for another's touch? To whom do I now give the warmth and love and fun that I once gave to my husband? And how do I plan for Paul's admonition that "it's better to marry than to burn with desire" in a culture where a single woman past age 40 has only a slight change of marrying again?

I have no answers for such questions. I know that the busier I am, the less I think about them (except late at night). But busyness only delays facing the dilemma. I have found that even now—after five years alone—I need to set aside time to mourn the loss of the joy that was ours for 25 years. On such days, like Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11, I must go to a quiet place—usually a place full of nature's beauty; I must give myself time and permission to remember and to let the tears flow; I must spend the hours needed to let the pain pass; I must wait until I hear God speak the words of assurance that I truly am a lovely and desirable person; and when I re-enter I must have good friends who accept me with my pain and who tell me that it's ok to feel bad. Only after such mourning will my loss am I again able to embrace my life as it is and to use the energy I once invested in my marriage to reach out to others.

Yes it's true that we as single people can be healthy and fulfilled. (I'm not so sure about whole and vibrantly sexual.) But that is possible only when we have found ways that help us face directly our fears, aloneness, uncertainties, not-OK-ness, hungers. I praise God for those exceptional still-married people who have been able to value me as an older single person. They are indeed rare. Often since I'm single I've sensed discomfort rather than acceptance from my brothers and sisters in Christ. Must singleness continue to lead to separation rather than celebration?

P.S. I'm an MCC volunteer, teaching English to African Independent Church leaders. It helps to follow such long-ago dreams!—*Rhoda M. Schrag, Lusaka, Zambia*





Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.

## News and Verbs

- Mary Kolb-Wykcoff, pastor of Taftsville (Vt.) Mennonite Church, will speak at an **All Women's Luncheon July 28 during Philadelphia 93**, the churchwide gathering of the Mennonite Church. Women can sign up for the luncheon when they register for the General Assembly.
- Valerie G. Rempel, graduate of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, Calif., was **winner of the 1992 John Horsch Mennonite History Essay Contest**. Her entry was titled: "She Hath Done What She Could: The Development of the Women's Missionary Services in the Mennonite Brethren Churches of the United States."
- Jean Janzen of Fresno, Calif., Julia Kasdorf of New York City, and Carol Pellman Mishler of Harrisonburg, Va., were

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

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**featured poets** at readings at Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg in fall 1992. EMC's language and literature department sponsored a Mennonite poet each month of the fall semester.

- The Women's Concerns Committee of MCC Alberta is sponsoring its **first inter-Mennonite women's retreat** April 23-25 at Camp Valaqua in Water Valley, Alta. Katie Funk Wiebe will be featured speaker. For information contact Anneli Braul, 403-275-1751.
- **A retreat for caregivers** working with people directly affected by domestic and sexual violence will be May 14-15 at the Notre Dame Retreat Centre in Waterdown, Ont. The retreat is sponsored by Women's Concerns and Mental Health and Disabilities Programs of MCC Canada. Leaders will be Melissa Miller of Shalom Counselling and Martha Smith Good, chaplain at Goshen (Ind.) College.
- "Healing the Church, Dealing with Sexual Abuse in the Body of Christ," will be the theme of this year's Family Life Resource Center's **annual caregiver's retreat**. The retreat will be April 23-25 near Harrisonburg, Va. Carolyn Heggen, author and psychotherapist from Albuquerque, NM, and the theater group AKIMBO will be featured. The Family Life Resource Center is sponsored by Virginia Mennonite Conference. For information call the center at 703-434-8450.
- **Goshen College seeks applicants for director of counseling and for a full-time tenure-track position in religion and ethics.** For more information contact Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526.



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